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Policy and Market Strategies of the Ecotourism Industry in Developing Countries

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Policy and Market Strategies of the Ecotourism Industry in Developing Countries

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Ecotourism is a growing industry around the world. However, in more recent years, ecotourism has become more than just a business. Developing nations have seen ecotourism contribute meaningfully to the local economy, the environment and indigenous populations. Forward-thinking public-sector policies to appropriately incentive the industry have come a long way. And, as the public and private sectors work together to mitigate problems in the industry such as greenwashing amongst bad actors and the ethical and moral concerns of what can be described as cultural colonialism, the good actors offer pristine examples of how ecotourism can set the stage for larger but more sustainable commercial development.

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Prologue:

For as long as I can remember, I've loved the outdoors. As a kid, I was lifting rocks looking for insects, lizards and the occasional garter snake. In my free time I'd sneak off to the creek below the house and wander the small pools catching crayfish and frogs. Weekends were spent at the family ranch where the out of doors was quite literally inescapable. Unsurprisingly all the things I liked to do were outdoor activities. Fishing, hunting, trapping, wildlife photography, hiking, kayaking etc. -- all were ways for me to explore the natural world I'd come to love and admire. I've never been drawn to religion but the similarities between what I've come to understand those of faith find in religion and what I find in the outdoors have always been striking. I grew to depend on that outlet for personal restoration, peace and perspective.

While the outdoors became essential to my sanity and an effective outlet for relieving the day-today doldrums, it was never a professional consideration. The outdoors was always something that was there for me when I needed it but it was never something, I thought I would explore professionally much less academically. Moreover, while preserving our environments and wild places was always a focal point of my policy studies, I never imagined that nature itself could be weaponized to lift populations out of poverty, drive economic growth or save livelihoods.

I began my graduate school career studying public policy and business convinced that the private sector was the last hope for substantive and dramatic changes in our world. If I could learn how to redirect the will and incentives of capitalism towards the areas where we need it most, then certainly I will have done my part – contributed my verse. Shortly before embarking

on my graduate education I came across an organization called Indifly. Indifly, which I will discuss further below, was pulling a bait and switch on the behalf of conservation by offering indigenous populations an alternative to the steady source of income they currently earned by selling pristine tracts of rainforests to lumber companies. Indifly instead, offered to teach the native populations how to manage, maintain and run a (catch and release) fishing lodge. Indifly is backed by several private sector companies, most notably Costa Del Mar, the large sunglasses and sportswear company. The lodge employs and is majority owned by the indigenous population. The Indifly model demonstrates; 1. that private and public partnerships can have an effect on small out of the way places and communities in this world, 2. that fishing, for example, can radically shift the economic circumstances of an entire indigenous population and 3. conservation can, in fact, be profitable. (Note: #3 speaks specifically to conservation and not just sustainability or a broader "environmental awareness" definition. Indifly's model is not perfect, nor is it going to save the entirety of the rainforests of South America, but it has without question contributed a verse.

Over the course of this report I hope to discuss and review eco-tourism strategies in third world countries. What's working? What's not? I will review two case studies in different areas of the world in the hopes of uncovering best practices. I'll discuss "greenwashing" and ask whether some of these operations are just a form of economic colonialism updated and justified for the 21st century. I'll also examine the perspective of the host country. How can a government incentivize the right type of development in the tourism sector? If not ecotourism, then what? Finally, I'll ask what we can expect out of this sector going forward.

I've jokingly told my fellow students and contemporaries that this report was just a way for me to explore a couple of the most cutting-edge fishing, hunting, and adventure operations around the globe. I hope over the course of this report, I'm able to demonstrate much…much more.

Introduction to Eco-tourism: Definitions, History & Growth, and Key Players

In 2002, over 1,200 participants from 132 countries met in Quebec in what was to become the first ever World Ecotourism Summit. Attendance at the summit dwarfed expectations with twice as many delegates and representative countries than were expected in Quebec. One of the most important deliverables from that meeting was a global consensus on how to define eco-tourism. Perhaps as important, the summit made particular reference to how it differentiates itself from other types of tourism. The definition follows below:

> Ecotourism embraces the principles of sustainable tourism, concerning the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism. It also embraces the following specific principles, which distinguish it from the wider concept of sustainable tourism; contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage; includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation, and contributes to their well-being; interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to visitors; lends itself better to independent travelers, as well as to tours for small-size groups.[1]

Here is the key takeaway: while sustainable tourism endeavors to adapt the core principles of sustainability (and John Elkington's "triple bottom line" mentality) into the legacy tourism market, eco-tourism actually elevates those principles to a primary consideration of the traveler. No longer is a traveler meant to be a bystander to the communities seen and explored,

[1] Irish Times

now that traveler is asked to “contribute actively”. In the case of Indifly, for example, “contribute actively” might best describe the revenue flowing back into the indigenous communities, the switch from monetizing one irreplaceable natural resource (a rainforest) to a renewable one (a fish species), or even the cultural significance of helping an indigenous population understand the value in their own bio-diversity.

Megan Epler Wood, now the director of the International Sustainable Tourism Initiative at Harvard University crystalizes the definition even further. She defines ecotourism as simply, “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”[2]. Ms. Epler Wood’s current work with the International Sustainable Tourism Board indicates a larger shift in the market that very much finds its root in the WES’ definition of ecotourism above. However, in Epler Wood’s definition the focal point is less on the intent of the traveler and more on the impact. Epler Wood worked for the nascent World Wildlife Fund in the 80s, went on to produce “The Environmental Tourist” for PBS and then founded The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). She was succeeded at TIES by Dr. Martha Honey author of Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise? Both Epler Wood and Dr. Honey are considered experts if not originators of the policy implications and general conversation surrounding ecotourism today.

[2] Green Global

On its surface these two definitions of ecotourism differ only slightly. But as will be shown below that slight difference can lead to serious distinctions in policy, operational longevity and impact.

History & Growth

It's important to understand the history and context of this industry and in particular how it has evolved over time. There's a reason we weren't asking these questions 20 years ago. In fact, eco-tourism wasn't even codified in the Oxford Dictionary until 1982. The United States Institute for Peace notes that "in 1950 just fifteen destinations – primarily European - accounted for 98% of all international arrivals. By 2007 that figure had fallen to 57%".[3] The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) which is "responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism" found a 6% increase in international arrivals during the first 4 months of 2018 exceeding UNWTO's forecasts.[4] In sum, more people are travelling more frequently to a more diverse set of destinations. Global tourism is a full 10% of global GDP with about half of that being attributed directly to ecotourism[5].

Eco-tourism specifically may have had its roots in the environmental activism of the 70s with some arguing that the core concepts of eco-tourism go all the way back to 1901 when the Sierra Club began its "Outings Program". The outings program was little more than a series of

[3] USIP
[4] UNWTO
[5] Huffington Post

hosted nature walks, but it is one of the first recorded instances of travelling for the sole purpose of "experiencing" natural beauty and immersion.[6] While neither the UN nor Ms. Epler Wood's definition of ecotourism would include the "Outings Program" (the outings program lacks the intent of the UN definition and the impact focus of Ms. Epler Wood's definition), surely it can be assumed that the marketplace for ecotourism evolved from the same type of audience. The first truly formative text on eco-tourism is attributed to Mexican conservationist Hector Ceballos-Lascurain. In 1996, his text "Tourism, Ecotourism and Protected Areas", was published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).[7] Mr. Lascurain served as the ecotourism advisor to both the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

But If ecotourism had an adolescence it was the 80s. At least that is where the more modern concept of ecotourism (as captured by the definitions above) would emerge. Ms. Epler Wood notes:

> In the 1980s the idea of sustainable development was new…there was a big conversation about finding ways to benefit local people who wanted to conserve natural areas. A few years later my husband and I lived in Colombia on a joint Fulbright scholarship. [We realized that] people visiting the rainforest were bringing a majority of the benefits those locals were seeing.[8]

[6] Green Global
[7] Ibid
[8] Ibid

Her successor at TIES, Dr. Martha Honey expands in an interview after her keynote presentation at an industry conference in 2014. Honey noted that since the 80's the discussion around ecotourism hadn't changed and...

> it hasn't lost or changed its core values, which are essentially that tourism should be done in a way that's beneficial to environmental conservation and local communities and respectful of local cultures… the Slow Food movement, organic agriculture, travel philanthropy, concern about human trafficking and child sexual abuse, fair trade, carbon offsets, and animal welfare are all branches on the original tree.[9]

There are several reasons for the continued growth in tourism and ecotourism. To paraphrase an old trope on globalization, the world is shrinking as technology ties markets, industries and customers together. An increase in population parallels an increase in the international aviation sector whose price wars have afforded larger amounts of people to get to a more diverse set of destinations. While this speaks to legacy tourism and to some extent the growth of eco-tourism as well, one particular data point seems to relate more directly to the specific and recent jump the ecotourism sector's growth. Taylor Smith, the founder of Blueboard, Inc., a company that offers experiential employee rewards, put it plainly in a CNBC article; "millennials aren't spending money on cars, TVs and watches…we're renting scooters and touring Vietnam,

[9] Ibid

rocking out at music festivals, or hiking Machu Pichu".[10] In a poll conducted by Harris Interactive more than "3 in 4 millennials (78%) would choose to spend money on a desirable experience or event over buying something desirable. 8 in 10 (77%) millennials say some of their best memories are from an event or live experience they attended or participated in".[11] In other words what was once a quaint cottage industry for forward thinking academics and conservationists was poised to capture the most coveted audience segment in the world; millennials.

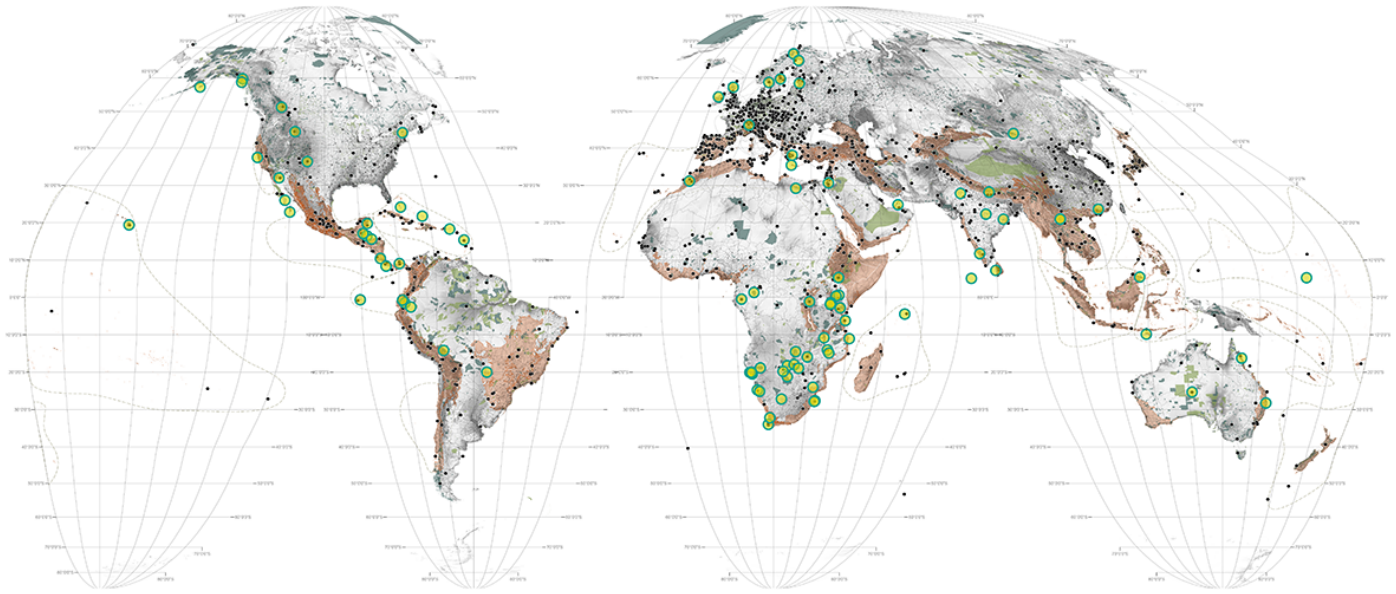
Overwhelmingly, millennials are searching for experiences and the core tenets of eco-tourism resonate with an increasingly progressive, diverse and socially conscious "experience seeking generation" that now commands a large portion of the global economy. A recent article in US News cites a report from the nonprofit, Sustainable Travel International that mentions "60 percent of all leisure travelers in the U.S. are sustainable travelers. Among the fastest-growing subsets of sustainable travelers are eco-travelers."[12]

The connection between eco-tourism and the third world is, on its surface, fairly obvious. Most of the world's remaining natural wonders are found in those areas that have for one reason or another avoided the attention of ubiquitous urbanization and the masses of the western "consumer" economy. A body of work from Richard Weller, the University of Pennsylvania chair of the Urbanism and Landscape Architecture School (and his team) amalgamated research from

[10] CNBC
[11] Harris
[12] US NEWS

Epler Wood's work at TIES and UNESCO to develop **Exhibit 1** seen below. The map aggregates top ecotourism destinations (green circles) with various levels of protected areas as identified by IUCN and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) World Conservation Monitoring Center. When seen together with **Exhibit 2 and 3,** which are respectively; a map outlining the cities of 300,000 or more that are projected to sprawl rapidly (similar to most major US metropolitan areas in the mid-twentieth century), and a map highlighting the most endangered ecological regions in the world, the problem and the urgency of the situation becomes quite clear.

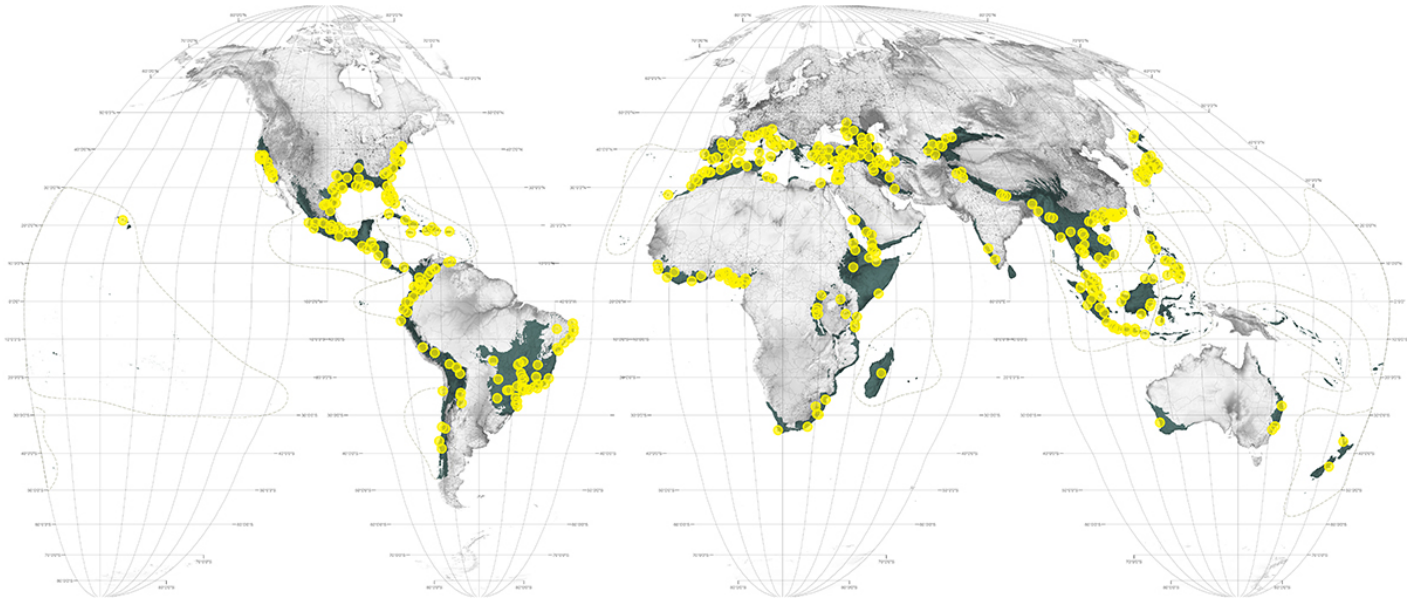
Exhibit #1: Ecotourism Hotspots and Protected Regions[13]



(Note: Ecotourism hotspots are noted by the green circles.)

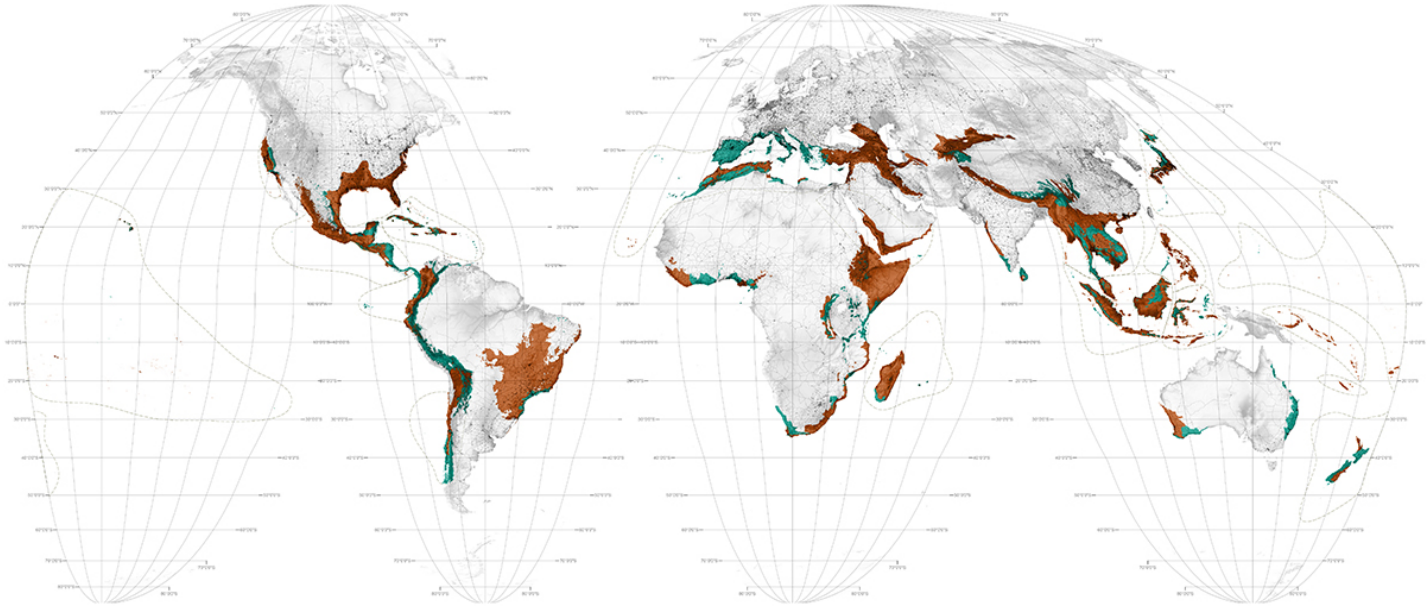
[13] Ecotourism World Maps

Exhibit #2: 422 Cities Expected to Sprawl Dramatically in the next 10-20 Years[14]



(Note: Cities are noted by the yellow circles.)

Exhibit #3: Conservation Targets as Identified by IUCN & TIES[15]



[14] Ibid
[15] Ibid

Case Studies & Operating Models: Indifly & Wilderness Safaris

After addressing the broad definitions, history and thought leaders in the ecotourism space the logical next step would is to explore how both the private and public sectors are approaching the marketplace. What follows is a brief discussion of two different examples of ecotourism entities. They are the most prominent models seen in the market. Each represents a different approach from the private sector's perspective, and each serve as a mechanism by which best practices can be explored.

Indifly: The Corporate Sponsored Nonprofit

Indifly (mentioned above) is a nonprofit organization backed by several corporate sponsors that uses fly-fishing to "create opportunities for low-income communities while protecting resources and the environments that sustain them by us[ing] fly fishing as a tool for transforming the live of indigenous people and protecting valued environments".[16]

In Rewa Village Guyana on the Rewa river (a tributary of the Amazon) lives a fish called the Arapaima. Rare and previously thought to be uncatchable on a hook and line, the Arapaima suffers from over fishing and poaching from the native population. Combined with a shrinking habitat (attributable to the ceaseless march of development), the overfishing and poaching is almost completely committed by the native populations to feed their families and maintain their livelihoods. The Arapaima suffers the forgivable ignorance of the indigenous population. Indifly's solution was crafted out of a set of sustainably pillars that are duplicated below[17]:

[16] Indifly
[17] Indifly

1. **Cultural**: Protect cultural heritage and empower local communities.
2. **Economic**: Create opportunities for sustainably livelihoods
3. **Environmental**: Conserve resources through science-based management.

With the help of corporate sponsors, Indifly went through the tedious process of obtaining permission from the Guyanese government to fish for Arapaima, explored and developed the fishery, built a lodge and the necessary logistics infrastructure to get clients to and from one of the most secluded parts of the Amazon basin, and essentially gifted the entire operation to the local population. Today because of Indifly the Rewa Ecolodge is booked years in advance and employs a majority of the local population. As a Costa Del Mar promotional video notes; “a community came together to save a fish and that fish is saving the community.”

The Indifly model is distinct in several ways; first Indifly is a nonprofit and other than the goodwill earned by Costa Del Mar and other sponsoring companies, the entirety of the profit from the Rewa Ecolodge fishing operation goes back into the community. Second, the Rewa example doesn’t target the traditional ecotourist market. While not a far jump, the adventure angler is visiting for the fishing experience and not necessarily because of the sustainability or moral goals inherent in the operation. Adventure anglers specifically seek out the least discovered and developed environments. To some extent, Indifly had a serviceable, addressable market inherent in the model and waiting for them. In other words, had Rewa just decided to build a traditional ecolodge, it’s doubtful that the economics would’ve worked. Third, in few

other models is the success and education of the local population so closely tied together. It's difficult to quantify the cultural change inherent in transitioning a working age male from an indigenous population to a conservation minded fly fishing guide, lodge administrator or employee. But since a majority of the village is employed by the lodge, subsistence comes from the lodge and not the sale of timber rights or the migration of working age males to mines and mills. Lastly, the compounding scale of the tangible benefits to the environment is, at the very least, notable. This part of the world is home to over 1600 species of birds, 15% of the world's freshwater and many of the world's most endangered species.

Indifly: Model Evaluation

Indifly's model is a difficult one to replicate. While somewhat divorced from the notion of a profit motive, the ownership structure means that the community lives and dies by the success of the lodge. It's sustainability in its purest (and oldest) form but required the will, capital and interest of an amalgamation of parties to build and execute on the vision as the people of Rewa have no capital markets, infrastructure or skillsets to build out this type of operation. It bears remembering that in the absence of the lodge the principal source of income was either earned by selling tracts of rainforest to timber companies or trekking to the mines and mills that turn the rainforest's resources into a marketable good.

Indifly may also have an intent problem especially under the UN definition of ecotourism. The main customer of Rewa Ecolodge are adventure anglers and not necessarily the classic ecotourism audience that might travel with a more noble intent. In that way it may be a difficult model to replicate for the legacy ecotourism audience.

But perhaps the most difficult bit of the Indifly model to replicate is the players. Indifly found a strong set of corporate sponsors in the outdoor industry and a motivated group of individuals to execute on the vision. With Indifly, as with all ecotourist operations, success is difficult to measure but a decrease in the rate of decrease among the Arapaima's breeding population as well as some of the local flora and fauna is a good start. The Indifly project might best be characterized as a short-term capital investment project that yields goodwill dividends in perpetuity.

Wilderness Safaris: Traditional Private Sector

Wilderness Safaris is one of the largest safari operators in Africa. Operating in 7 African nations and traded on the Johannesburg Stock exchange since 2010, Wilderness sets itself apart from other safari operations merely in its size and reach.[18] Wilderness was founded by two former safari guides in 1983. The company's mission "to be Africa's leading ecotourism organization, creating life-changing journeys in order to build sustainable conservation economies and inspire positive action" encapsulates the founders desire to give greater financial benefits to (in this case) the indigenous peoples of Botswana and protect wildlife.[19]

Similar to Indifly, Wilderness built their operations around certain pillars that resemble a strategic framework, the 4Cs. The 4Cs and a brief description of each can be found below.

[18] HBR
[19] Ibid

1. **Commerce**: The commerce pillar speaks to the company's operating strategy and framework. The company caters to high end luxury travelers that are acquired through dedicated marketing and a network of independent travel agents. Wilderness also owned a private airline an several tour companies to facilitate travel from camp to camp.

2. **Conservation**: The conservation "C" describes the company's ongoing focus and commitment to conservation. Wilderness itself pours resources into the management of any parcel of land under its lease. Conservation tactics include monitoring, anti-poaching, vegetation rehabilitation; native species regenerations etc.[20] The conservation "C" also applies to environmental management systems that essentially seek to mitigate the impact of the camps and the company on the environment.

3. Community: Divided into internal and external the Wilderness internal community is the 2,200 staff members Wilderness employs, 97% of whom are nationals of the country in which they are working. External communities include host governments, indigenous populations, NGOs etc. Local communities' benefit, at the very least, from the payments Wilderness makes to local community-based organizations entrusted with managing the land's natural resources.[21]

4. **Culture:** The cultural elements of the business are complex, but Wilderness has begun to offer guests a cultural experience as well that includes visits to the local

[20] Ibid
[21] Ibid

villages and townships. More broadly the culture "C" was intended to "foster a cultural exchange". Culture was the last C to be incorporated into the framework.[22]

The Wilderness model is distinct from Indifly in that it represents a more traditional private sector approach to the ecotourism industry. Of particular note is the distinction in ownership. While Indifly gifted ownership in Rewa Ecolodge to the local community, the camps and operations are owned and run exclusively by Wilderness. Instead of ownership the local community benefits from the jobs and lease payments. A huge piece of this consideration is the relationship between ownership and host country public policy that allows indigenous population to own land and that can accommodate outside investment via joint venture or otherwise. With regard to jobs, wilderness employs 2,500 people globally. Most come from the nations in which the company operates. What is staggering is the average dependency ratio "of seven family members to each staff member."[23] Wilderness provides and pays out to the community-based organizations as a result of the Community Based Natural Resources Management program which will be discussed later on in the section evaluating appropriate host nation policy strategies.

From an environmental conservation standpoint, the situation is not dramatically different. Without a doubt Wilderness has taken care of the land under its influence. Dr. Sue Syman, the manager of sustainability at Wilderness notes:

[22] Ibid
[23] HBR

> "In the 2.9 million hectares under WS's influence there are 1,100 bird species and 290 mammal species, but most importantly there are no fewer than 40 threatened and four critically endangered species, which are decreasing worldwide but are stable or increasing in WS areas".[24]

Wilderness Safaris: Model Evaluation

The Wilderness model brings to light the push pull between a company's commitments and profitability and calls into question what it means to "do good by doing well". While there is no question that Wilderness has done good for both the environment and the locals of the environments in which they operate, the company's commitments deserve more scrutiny particularly with regard to the existential threats on the long-term life of the company – i.e. sustainability. Is this ecotourism? Or just well-funded CSR?

For example, in this unique case isn't taking care of and preserving the land really reinvesting into the business? It's an expense item on the income statement. Does that make it a true and pure example of an ecotourism company or is it no different than a pharmaceutical company investing in R&D. Theoretically the company could stop these investments. If they do does that negate their status as an ecotourism operation? Isn't Wilderness, in that case, just profiting off of the natural resources that are available? Does it matter?

[24] Ibid

Wilderness CMO Roche calls into question the sustainability of the model in 2016 after $1.3M was spent directly on biodiversity conservation. That $1.3M came directly from operating revenues. Roche notes; “we are vulnerable to market forces, but NGOs are vulnerable to the largesse of philanthropy”.[25] The only problem there is that Wilderness isn’t an NGO and the $1.3M isn’t necessarily philanthropy. Moreover, the apparent tax benefits between $1.3M expense and a $1.3M philanthropic donation are of material difference. In the meantime, over the 2015 – 2016 season while conservation contributions increased, the number of research projects supported, the number of acres that benefit, number of collaborations with institutions in the same period, all decreased. In short, what happens to the environment and the community if Wilderness has a bad year?

Wilderness fits the UN definition of ecotourism as it stands but it’s worth asking as the pristine regions of sub-Saharan Africa become more saturated with high end safari operations how long the Wilderness model will hold out. They will not always be able to charge the prices they are able to charge. Nor will they be able to pay higher rents for their leases when it comes to land acquisition. When revenue is constrained where does Wilderness cut costs?

[25] Ibid

The Problems of Ecotourism: Greenwashing & 21st Century Colonialism

The cases above hint toward a few of the most common problems seen in the ecotourism. First among them, as illustrated by the Wilderness case, is identifying ecotourism operations. Even using the intent and impact focused definitions above it can be difficult to clearly identify ecotourism from sustainable tourism, ethical tourism, environmental tourism, agritourism etc. Moreover, the commodification and popularity of the "green craze" or "green market" has allowed some bad actors to increase their market share and attract new customers by making claims about sustainability, "green" initiatives and impact mitigation. Along with greenwashing claims are indictments of colonialism or an evolved form of colonialism rationalized with a progressive argument about the economic benefits for indigenous populations.

Greenwashing

Greenwashing is nothing new. David Gelles puts it simply in his New York Times article aptly titled "Social Responsibility That Rubs Right Off";

> Greenwashing, when a company tries to portray itself as more environmentally minded than it actually is, has intensified in recent decades as consumers have warmed to sustainable and organic products and services. Brands, trying to capitalize on that trend, often try to outdo one another with eco-credentials. But in the rush to be seen as green, companies often exaggerate claims, or simply make things up.[26]

[26] New York Times

How does that manifest itself in ecotourism? Easily. Many consumers who would call themselves ecotravellers believe simply by pursuing outdoor focused adventures they need not look any further into the sustainability of the operation, measures taken to mitigate impact, or cultural, environmental and educational benefits that might be remitted to the local populations. Ayako Ezaki, director of communications for TIES and a protégé of Ms. Epler Wood points to a stark example; "I've stayed at hotels where you can put a card on your bed if you want your linens changed every day, and on the back it says something like 'Save the Planet'…not washing linens every day does not save the planet. And sometimes, they wash them every day anyway."[27]

From obvious resource mining in disguise to subtle nuances and semantics in the way they discuss their "green" or sustainability initiatives, ecotravelers must be the most thorough and well-informed travelers. Australia's ecotourism destination website recommends a few tactics to uncover some of the industry detractors the includes; looking for certified products, asking for proof of environmental initiatives and questioning vague or obscure language like "eco-friendly" or "natural". There's an important difference between "being green" and "going green".[28] Dr. Martha Honey notes in her book, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*:

> Much of what is marketed as ecotourism amounts to only ecotourism lite, which offers tidbits of nature or minor environmental reforms…even worse 'greenwashing' scams

[27] US News
[28] EcoTourism Australia

use environmentally friendly images but follow none of the principles and practices of sound ecotourism.[29]

Greenwashing is an easy sin to commit in the field of ecotourism and the actions of those bad actors only further muddies the waters as TIES and other organizations seek to hold bad actors accountable.

21st Century Colonialism

In 2002, Pope John Paul II in honor of World Tourism Day issued a written papal message. In it, he raises an alarm; "if the protection of the environment is promoted as an end in itself, there is the risk that new modern forms of colonialism will come into being, which might injure the traditional rights of resident communities in a specific territory," the Holy Father explains. His quotation deserves a little unpacking.[30]

Most travelers to ecotourism destinations originate from the US, UK and Western Europe or Australia. Wilderness recorded about 60% from the US, 30% from Western Europe and the remaining 10% from Australia or Asia. The fact is that given the "out of the way" nature of most ecotourism destinations a vacation can be costly. Between flights to more obscure locales, additional legs that include small planes, boats or vans and the costs incurred by supplying the destinations with electricity, water and food can accumulate quickly.

[29] Honey
[30] Vatican

All of these factors lead to restricted availability in the ecotourism market. To be frank, ecotourism at present, is an activity enjoyed by the mid to upper class of westernized developed nations. Ecotourism is a luxury activity. Paul Hanna, lecturer in sustainable tourism at the University of Surrey, puts a finer point on it by asking the simple question "is it ethical to take a luxury holiday in a 'developing' country?".[31]

Ecotourism is a huge part of the economy in many of these out of the way places and when an operation like an ecotourism lodge moves in the fundamental dynamics of the region's infrastructure and economy changes. Employees often are required at the lodge 7-days a week and often are "on-call' for months at a time. Resources are often rediverted in substantive ways. An ecotourism lodge in the Maldives has monopolized most of the island chain's disparate sources of fresh water. The reality is that these countries don't have the institutions to protect them – there's no National Labor Relations Board to oversee appropriate workers issues and Public Utilities Commission to hear water right disputes. Wilderness Safaris added "culture" as the last of their "4C" framework because "the company considered cultural tourism to be a sensitive and imperfectly-understood area that carried risks – for example, of misunderstandings or conflict between guests and community members, or the exploitation or commodification of the indigenous cultures".[32]

[31] Fair Observer
[32] HBR

But the issue is bigger than that. It's about ethics, arrogance and perspective. Many of the indigenous populations in these locales have a stronger connection and relationship with the natural world than the amenities of a big city would allow. For example, the Native American populations that predate the arrival of white settlers in American were leaps and bounds ahead of the European settlers when it came to sustainability and the importance of the environment. The state of the American buffalo and the many American species that have gone extinct since are just a few excruciating examples.

Who are ecotravelers to assume that their activities are helping a population progress towards some sort of subjective definition of progress as exported by developed nations? Hanna sums up the thought nicely; "ultimately, we must also ask whether on a moral level it is beneficial for people and environments around the world to 'develop' to live like those in the West.

The Public Sector Approach:

The importance of these ecological preservation areas cannot be overstated. However, as apparent in the definitions of ecotourism, the ecological focus cannot be allowed to obscure the equally important socioeconomic commonalities that set the stage for "successful" ecotourism destinations. Those commonalities include but are not limited to; the presence of an indigenous population, the state of the host nation's transportation infrastructure, and the extent to which the host nation has put in place a set of policy prescriptions that incentivizes the industry without allowing for regulatory capture or unanticipated negative externalities. Both of the models discussed above are only possible because of the appropriate public policy infrastructure.

Botswana (Wilderness Safaris)

In the Wilderness Safari case made several references to the community-based organizations (CBO) that were entrusted to manage the natural resources of the land. Those CBOs evolved out of dramatic changes in the land use policies of Southern Africa that came about in the 1980s. Photo-safari operators previously could only operate with in the bounds of government recognized parks and preserves. In the 1980s "Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia all undertook land form…and began the process of creating conservancies which offered communities the legal rights not only to manage their own land but also their own wildlife".[33] Forward thinking policies like this have both granted access to tourism operators to new and previously unregulated wild areas while also ensuring that the local populations had an infrastructure by which they could benefit and have a say in the market.

[33] HBR

Botswana in particular represents one of the beacons of effective and sustainable tourism policy among the developing world. First and foremost, Botswana has proactively given over almost 17% of its land mass to conservation. This type of zoning designation, similar to zoning in any urban area, comes with it a set of rules and regulations. Second, Botswana has also taken steps to enfranchise the local population at every turn, especially after a bevy of incidents that erupted when local populations were stripped of their "ancient" rights to hunt, fish and farm on the land. Most of the land designated for conservation is either owned by tribal entities or trusts that yield management decisions to the community. Botswana operated on a concession model with set term limits in each agreement to ensure controlled management of the concession. Moreover, concessions are acquired via tender. Bidders are required to match the highest price offered and are selected based on overall operator competence to ensure sustainable and mutually beneficial operations. The revenue and rent breakdown from each concession is highlighted below:

> Concession rental is paid to the Land Boards; a resource royalty of 4% of total turnover is paid to local government agencies; a 10% sales tax on accommodation receipts, and 25% income tax, is paid to central government; a P1-00 per bed night training levy goes to the Tourism Department, and game reserve entry fees of P70 per person per day also go to central government coffers.[34]

[34] Government of Botswana

Finally, Botswana also charges fees for park access. Fees have been steadily increasing since 2000 which may reflect the government's desire to shift many luxury ecotourism operations to concessions to better distribute the benefits of patronage among local communities.

Botswana recognized early that while they weren't rich in oil, gold or silver, the Okavango Delta was one of the most pristine and most diverse ecological regions in the world. Understanding that value, the policy process is one that starts with conservation and preservation, with a tangible benefit to local communities in a close second. From a market perspective Botswana has enticed a low volume high yield strategy. Operators like Wilderness are very much luxury operations, leaving little room for mid-tier operators who often don't have the resources or the will to meet the environmental standards for which the country has asked.

Guyana (Indifly)

When compared to Botswana, Guyana is in the infancy of the policy development process. Similar to Botswana, Guyana boasts enormous natural and ecological resources – namely a dense and unexplored section of the Amazon rainforest. Ironically, the Guyana government declared ecotourism an area of focus in the early 90s.

Guyana lacked (and to some extent still lacks) the critical infrastructure needed for the most basic level of economic development much less the niche area of ecotourism. Progress has been steady over the last decade and includes;

modernization of Cheddi Jagan International Airport (improvement of

> lounge and instrumentation); widening of the road between the airport and the capital; creation of the Guyana Tourism Authority, a regulatory body; creation of the Guyana Investment Office (Go-Invest), an investment promotion agency… successful recruitment of new air carriers Copa, Surinam Air, Dynamic Air, and INSEL; upgrading of the Lethem, Annai, Orinduik, and Kaieteur airstrips; upgrading of Lethem-Annai Road and Bartica-Linden Road; construction of two large hotels (Princess and Marriott hotels),[35]

that are crucial in affording overnight stays and in-transit options for travelers venturing to Guyana from Europe or Asia.

Economically Guyana is dealing with a very different set of circumstances than Botswana. Guyana has a primary goods market place that cater principally to agriculture and mining, timber or other extractive industries. Reliance on these types of legacy goods immediately pits ecotourism and natural tourism at odds with the reigning economic players. The Guyanese government finds itself in a position of choosing between the sustainable approach or the profitable approach. In a country like Guyana where corruption abounds and a large portion of the population live in poverty, making the case for a "promising long-term investment in our environmental assets" can be difficult.[36]

[35] IDB
[36] IDB

The availability of quality accommodations and services in the ecotourism industry in Guyana is limited. The government cannot afford to make financial concessions to incentivize the industry and has no mechanism by which to include the local populations into the decision-making process around the fate of their land. Furthermore, Guyana shares its ecological diversity with the more established markets of Brazil, Colombia and Peru. Each country offers a stronger, more stable political environment and a rich diversity of professional operations that call each country home. The Okavango Delta in Botswana, on the other hand, is unique and can only be experienced in Botswana.

Finally, despite Guyanese government's lip-service over the last decade the government has invested comparatively few dollars into the industry. The World Travel and Tourism Council estimated government spending on the tourism industry at roughly $19.9M a year – a fraction of what some other countries in the region are spending on an annual basis to develop ecotourism markets of their own.[37]

[37] Ibid

What makes for a successful ecotourism destination?

Over the course of exploring this topic several predominant themes have become apparent.

Ecological & Environmental Resources

In the case of Botswana and Wilderness Safaris the Okavango Delta was the sole and unitary driver of interest among the ecotourism community. In the case of Indifly's lodge in Guyana the rarity and scarcity of the Arapaima drew adventure anglers from across the globe. In Costa Rica, one of the most successful countries to implement a thriving ecotourism economy, a small strip of rainforest wedged between two oceans offers an unmatched biodiversity. In Ecuador the Galapagos Islands are home to species that can't be found anywhere else in the world.

Cultural tourism while relatively new, introduces ethical and moral questions that should be carefully contemplated as the effects of this type of cultural interaction and transference can't be predicted. Without the natural resources, specifically ecological or environmental, attempting to create demand for an ecotourism industry is a folly.

Education over Cash

While the current hype in ecotourism is including the local communities in the economic development process little speaks to the next iteration of that inclusion beyond a form of payments – be it leases, fees or rents. What's obvious in the Indifly model is that the impact of the education of the local population around the Arapaima, and around conservation goes far beyond whatever short term leases or equity arrangements the population may be privy to.

Dr. Honey speaks to the compensation arrangements with caution and allows that "although such compensation can significantly improve daily life in poor rural communities, it may do little to equip local communities with the educational and technical skills and political know-how they will need to assume an active role in ecotourism".[38]

Strong Government Support

The Indifly project took almost 3 years simply to get approval to explore the possibility of the Rewa Ecolodge. Botswana on the other hand takes an active role in their concession tenders and has turned ecotourism into one of the most profitable sectors in the country. Thoughtful and dedicated government buy-in is irreplaceable. Even private sector pockets cannot replace the impact of political and economic commitment. A well enfranchised government will also realize the importance of a sound infrastructure apparatus to the ecotourism industry. While NGO and nonprofit involvement can be structured in a helpful way "it is difficult for community-based ecotourism to take hold and expand without strong government support".[39]

Perhaps the most important role a government can play is to delegate the implementation of any national tourism policy. More often than not the appropriate policies lack the detail around implementation which leads development solely to the private sector.

[38] Honey
[39] Ibid

Conclusions, Best Practices & Takeaways

Ecotourism is valuable. Several studies in Dr. Honey's research indicate that in Central American countries "a stay over ecotourist puts eighteen to twenty-eight times more money into the local economy than a cruise passenger, while a study of game farming in Kenya found that wildlife tourism was fifty times more lucrative than cattle crazing".[40] Clearly, for developing nations that can harness their natural resources in an effective and sustainable way, ecotourism can be rewarding "low-hanging fruit" and a reliable first step to a thriving commercial economy.

Like any industry there are good and bad actors. Greenwashing is abundant and easy to pull off in an industry that depends on green marketing and green language to attract their core customer base. The cultural implications of committing to local community involvement are largely unknown. A very logical argument could be made that exporting westernized environmental values should not in any way shape or form be a goal or even a biproduct of investment in ecotourism.

Finally, what is certain is that when taken in concert, a forward-thinking local government combined with the capital of ecotravellers, does have the power to shake lose economic stagnation. Moreover, ecotourism is poised to be the minnow that swallowed the shark. Rather than ecotourism suffers the pollution of the much larger legacy tourism industry (high impact hotels and luxury cruise liners), the values of ecotourism are borrowed more and more in the legacy tourism markets. Megan Eppler Wood is now working for the Institute of Sustainable

[40] Honey

Tourism at Harvard for exactly that reason. Let's not allow the principles of sustainability to be captured only in the niche ecotourism market.

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